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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000273

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS MAY 17; WHAT ARE THE
PRESIDENT'S POWERS?

REF: VILNIUS 254

Classified By: Ambassador John A. Cloud for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶1.](#) (U) Summary: European Commissioner Dalia Grybauskaite continues to far outpace the six other candidates in opinion polls for the May 17 presidential election. No analyst or politician we have talked to has questioned whether she will win the presidency, but only whether she will do so in the first round. The Lithuanian Constitution assigns some substantive powers to the president. But those powers are not always well defined by the Constitution, so a president's strength can depend in large part on personal popularity or support in the parliament. With election day nigh, and with Grybauskaite indicating that she would push for a stronger role, a look at Lithuanian presidential power is timely. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (U) Lithuania's Constitution says that the president decides the basic issues of foreign policy and, together with the government, conducts foreign policy. But the president has much less say in setting economic and other domestic policies. The president can initiate legislation, and can veto laws passed by the Seimas (parliament). The president also appoints and can dismiss the prime minister, with the assent of the Seimas, and can approve, or not, the ministers selected by the prime minister.

[¶3.](#) (C) We spoke recently with three former presidential advisors about the possibilities and limits of presidential power in Lithuania. Lauras Bielinis resigned in April from his post as domestic-policy advisor to President Valdas Adamkus. Toma Birmontiene was a legal advisor to President Adamkus in 2004-05 and now sits on the Constitutional Court. Alvydas Medalinskas was foreign-policy advisor to Rolandas Paksas, the president who was impeached in 2004. All agreed that a president's personality and standing, as well as his or her level of support in the Seimas, can determine how much power a Lithuanian president wields, especially in domestic policy. "According to the Constitution, a president cannot interfere much in domestic matters," said Bielinis. "But if we're not talking about executive power, but about moral authority, that's very important."

[¶4.](#) (U) Grybauskaite, on leave from her job as European Commissioner for Financial Programming and Budget, has an overwhelming lead over the six other candidates for president, according to all opinion polls (reftel). On the campaign trail, she has said that the president needs to spend more time focusing on domestic concerns, rather than traveling and dealing with foreign relations. Grybauskaite, a former minister of finance, also said an early task for the new president should be to determine "what can be fixed by the president, together by the president and the government, or by the government under pressure from the president's office." She said, "I will be eager to, and will be, actively intervening in government actions. My advisors will be sitting in on government meetings each week. I do have experience in managing critical situations. I will be proposing new laws myself."

15. (C) Medaļinskas, however, pointed out that the Constitution gives the president policy-making power only in foreign affairs. "Grybauskaitė knows not so much about foreign policy, but she knows everything about economics," he said. "According to the Constitution, though, there is very little" that would allow her to assume power to set economic policy. "I would predict a very serious clash between the government, especially the Kubilius government, and Grybauskaitė on economic issues. Her position will very much depend on her popularity and the unpopularity of the prime minister."

16. (C) Birmontiene said, "The instruments of power are Constitutional only. But the president's ability to influence depends on other factors. A parliamentary majority plays a big role. The presidency of (Algirdas) Brazauskas showed this, because he had a strong Social Democrat majority in the Seimas when he was first elected. But when he lost that majority, he looked like a man with no power at all."

17. (C) Bielinis said that President Adamkus, in his second term, did not enjoy strong political support in the Seimas. "But the relationship was defined by the respect Seimas members had towards him. The personal authority or personal respect for the president is important. If he doesn't have any kind of support in the Seimas, he will simply be ignored."

17. (U) Grybauskaitė has the formal support of the Conservative and Liberal Movement parties, two of the four parties in the ruling coalition. The Conservatives, led by

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Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, are by far the largest parliamentary party with 45 of 141 seats. The two other coalition partners do not have their own candidates running and have not formally endorsed any single candidate.

18. (C) Despite a recent surge in attacks on her by the national daily newspaper Respublika, Grybauskaitė's popularity remains high. We have heard that since Respublika opened its campaign against Grybauskaitė, financial contributions to her campaign have risen dramatically. It remains to be seen whether this last-minute display of support will be enough to put her over the top, either in the first or, if needed, the second round.

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